DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 977 IR 056 707

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TITLE Cloning, Creating, or Merely Mutating? Translating Traditional Instructional Materials for Use in Electronic Learning Spaces.
PUB DATE 1997-04-00
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Administration Education; *Computer Mediated Communication; *Computer Uses in Education; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Group Discussion; Higher Education; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Instructional Innovation; Internet; *Online Systems; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the processes and outcomes of translating a traditionally-taught business writing course into the online format, using bulletin board software. The paper covers creating, teaching, and managing the online business writing course at Golden Gate University (San Francisco, California). Pedagogical objectives are to emulate group feedback and process-model writing activities online, in addition to delivering business writing course material. Course management objectives are to enable a "just-in-time" communicative environment online, one that meets the varying needs and speeds of both students and teacher. This work may help the teacher who is considering teaching in the electronic environment to successfully reformulate existing courses for electronic delivery. For those who are concerned with issues of course and program quality and possibly institutional accreditation, tentative findings are that well designed and delivered online courses match the quality of face-to-face courses. The successful online course must be highly managed and tightly structured, in addition to being interactive and driven by communication and feedback. The successful online course enables learning, and allows for expressions of the students' subjective and information needs. Regardless of how the technology shapes the experience, the emphasis in technology use should remain on effective communication that supports learning. (Author/SWC)

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Title

Cloning, Creating, or Merely Mutating? Translating traditional instructional materials for use in electronic learning spaces

Abstract

This presentation discusses the processes and outcomes of translating a traditionally-taught business writing course into the online format, using bulletin board software. Pedagogical objectives are to emulate group feedback and process-model writing activities online, in addition to delivering business writing course material. Course management objectives are to enable a "just-in-time" communicative environment online, one that meets the varying needs (and speeds) of both students and teacher. The contribution of this work is twofold: it may help the teacher who is considering teaching in the electronic environment to successfully reformulate existing courses for electronic delivery. For those who are concerned with issues of course and program quality and possibly institutional accreditation, tentative findings are that well designed and delivered online courses match the quality of face-to-face courses.

Title of the paper

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Cloning, Creating, or Merely Mutating? Translating traditional instructional materials for use in electronic learning spaces

Introduction: research question, summary of contribution and of the findings

This paper discusses creating, teaching and managing an online business writing course in the distance learning mode. The course (English 120, Advanced Business Writing) is a traditional junior-level course in our university's curriculum. The course focuses on business communication forms such as memos, letters and a research paper.

The primary research questions I'm pursuing are these: what are effective processes for transferring a traditional writing course (characterized by face-to-face group interaction and peer writing evaluation/feedback) to the online format? What are the educational outcomes that support the viability of online education?

The contribution this paper intends is to provide practical, pedagogically sound information for teachers considering teaching (or already teaching) online courses.
A tentative finding, based on teaching history, formal course evaluations, informal assessments and other student feedback, is that carefully structured online courses are educationally sound alternatives to traditional classes.

An implication of these findings is that the quality of online courses can match that of the traditional course against which the online course is measured. Online education, then, may be a viable instructional delivery system for colleges.

The information in this paper addresses three important areas of online education:

One. Creating the course: translating traditional instructional materials into electronic learning spaces

Two. Teaching an online course

Three. Managing an online course

Setting

Golden Gate University is a private university in San Francisco that provides education in law, tax, liberal arts and business, from undergraduate through doctoral level. Our classrooms are characterized by a broad mix of students, from international and traditional students to working professionals, ranging in age from the early 20's up. Most students are working toward degrees and certificates; many of them attend school in the evenings, and in intensive programs often taught on weekends.

The University offers courses at a number of satellite campuses in California. Online courses are of particular interest to the University because they offer the opportunity for increasing enrollment; for students, they offer a degree of convenience, particularly courses that are regularly taught at the San Francisco campus, but may be rarely, or never, offered at other campuses. For teachers, online education is (for some) challenging and exciting; however, competition from other institutions that offer online coursework as well as pressure from the university's accrediting agency require that online education be carefully considered so as to be considered viable for students, teachers, and administrators.

Instructor background

I'm an Assistant Professor in School of Technology and Industry; until January of 1997, I held the same position in the School of Arts and Sciences. I have strong interest and some experience in using technology in the classroom and as a medium for distance teaching and learning. My current interest is to determine how to successfully translate traditional face-to-face course materials and approaches into substantive online formats.

My testbeds are collegial work with interested faculty, but primarily a course titled Advanced Business Writing, which I've taught in traditional and online formats. The course is writing intensive, so I'm interested in translating the process-oriented components of a contemporary writing classroom (prewriting, drafting, revising, peer editing/reviewing and feedback) into the online format. My objective is to make the online experience as substantive and sastisfying to my students as a high quality traditional classroom experience.

I have taught this course for one complete trimester in Fall of 1996, and am currently teaching it for the second time.

The instructional medium

The Advanced Business Writing course is being taught using the University's bulletin board software, SoftArc's First Class. Students are given access to First Class (called GGUOnline!) and a unix account when they register at the university, and the entire community uses GGUOnline! to communicate.

The software provides a limited graphic interface whether used on campus or through an internet connection. From the student point of view, the software is now ubiquitous. From an instructor's point of view, First Class provides ease of use and management, along with reasonable security.

One. Creating the online course by translating traditional instructional materials for use in the electronic learning space

Translating existing course material first requires that a teacher clearly understand both course material and the delivery technology. It might seem more than obvious that we should know our course material, but successful translation requires revisiting course material, particularly the areas of pedagogy and content, to conform to the software's features. Each delivery technology offers a variety of tools, but all require that teachers revisit their course material (and possibly their belief systems as well) in light of the technology. Prior to moving a course online, the teacher should ask and answer questions such as these:

How do students come to understand course and content material in the traditional classroom?

What is the relationship of subject matter theory and application, both in my classroom and in the field under study?

To what extent do I think that students' existing beliefs and experiences influence their learning? How can those beliefs and experiences be used to enhance learning?

Having revisited the above matters, the teacher can ask three further questions:

What classroom tools and approaches do I currently use to transmit subject matter information?

How do I measure and evaluate student learning?

What is my role in directing student learning and the classroom experience?

Next, the teacher begins to combine this information with knowledge of the technology to shape the online version of the course.

Two. Teaching the online course

An effective learning experience requires a pleasant, businesslike place to learn. Computer windows will never be mistaken for classrooms, but it is possible to design an electronic area for class interaction that is businesslike and easy to use. My English 120 Conference window has several folders at root level, each with a custom icon: Hoo are You? for biographical information about class members; group folders, varying in number depending on enrollment; Hints for Being Online, which contains information about the computer system in use; Read Me First, containing an archived copy of the course syllabus as well as late-breaking group news; and Weekly Assignments, which contains one folder for each week of the class. Inside each Weekly Assignments folder are three things: a discussion of the week's assignment, including the lecture and due dates; the assignment itself; and the weekly quiz.

Students first contact the Weekly Assignments folder to find lecture notes, due dates, quizzes and assignments. Weekly material is posted on a previous Friday. They are encouraged to download this material and work on it offline, so as to economize as much as possible. During the first several weeks of class, be flexible with due dates as students adjust to the electronic environment.

In my writing course, I have severely condensed lectures and instead turned to a style of online discourse that emphasizes major points and that references the text extensively. To reinforce material, students complete quizzes that expect them to interact at several levels with the text and the lectures. They may be asked, for example, to complete problems or exercises, but they are also asked questions that expect reasoned analytic responses:

> Consider the model bad news letter on page 93. In a paragraph or two, discuss two reasons why it is pragmatically and psychologically important to provide alternatives to a reader in such a letter.

For writing interaction, students are placed in 3 or 4 person groups, with access limited to the instructor and other group members. These groups are be used to emulate classroom groups, in peer editing or discussion activities. The subjective benefit for students is that groups tend to give them a stable, interactive environment in which to discuss and deal with course work.

Students submit drafts of writing assignments to group folders for interaction and feedback. It is expected that each student comments on each group member's paper; the teacher likewise comments on all papers prior to submission. Quizzes are emailed to the instructor for grading, and completed letter and other formal assignments are expected to be faxed to the instructor's home fax machine.

Chat rooms are a feature of bulletin board software that allows teachers to construct an electronic discussion space. A good use of the feature is to assign topics and have selected groups (again, 3 or 4 is manageable) participate in the real time discussion.

Student responses to assessments and course evaluations indicate that these approachs, which attempts to emulate what is done in the face-to-face classroom, work well. They comment that they use the text more than they might in a regular course, which most find satisfactory. In fact, the text has become a resource to a greater extent than it is in the traditional course.

Using informal classroom assessments to gather information

One of the ways we gather perceptions about a traditional class is by informal information gathering techniques such as observing student body language, asking/answering questions and talking to students during office hours. In this way, we develop a meta-sense of the culture of the course.

In the online setting, we don't have access to these interpersonal tools, but we still need to get information from students about their perceptions, needs and concerns. Assessment tools such as those discussed by Angelo and Cross (1993) can be adapted to the online format to provide "just-in-time" information from the students' point of view. Since these assessments can be done anonymously, the information provided will often be frank; however, in the absence of face to face communication, assessments will quickly tell teachers what is working, and what is not. Students will of course email you individually about concerns, but common responses across assessments can provide teachers with information about what's working and what is not in the students' online world.

Feedback is an important part of the assessment process. Altering teaching or other instructional activities when assessments show the need is a way to validate student assessment information, but direct feedback via group or individual email, or perhaps by the telephone, to online students is an important communicative tool.

The need to "talk to" other people is strong for many students, but it's absolutely necessary for high-touch students. Overall, communication that addresses course material as well as subjective concerns creates an ongoing feedback loop that students need. This suggests an important point: the telephone is vital to communication and to student satisfaction with the online experience. Email may efficient, but it is not a substitute for talk.

Expect confusion during the first two weeks of an online course as the society and culture of the course are created. There will probably be more questions and problems about the technology than the course content. This seems to be normal, and the teacher should be flexible with due dates for submissions and group work during this time.

Two. Managing an online course for effectiveness, efficiency and the teacher's sanity.

Managing Enrollment

With students registering at a variety of sites, you may need to take an active role in managing course enrollment. Computerized enrollment systems may not provide timely information, particularly if a course is listed with different codes at different enrollment sites.

Clarify with your dean or department head that you need to keep enrollment low, at least during the first semester a class is taught. The perception that online classes will enable one teacher to instantly teach more students than before with the same outlay of time is a serious misconception. In some institutions, online teachers are given a teaching assistant; if this opportunity is provided to you, take it. You will quickly see that you spend much time uploading, downloading, printing and filing information, non-teaching tasks that someone can easily do for you.

The first time I taught my online writing course, it required three times as much time as a regular class even though it had only seven students. This semester, the course has 18 students and requires slightly more than twice as much time as a regular class. If your administrator will not support assistance or reduced enrollment, reconsider teaching the course, at least during a busy semester.

Before the class begins

Be responsible for having important information appear in the bulletin, schedules, syllabi and handbooks. Course expectations regarding technology should be clearly addressed, particularly requirements about student accounts, required computer access, and necessary software. Include a discussion of the personal skills necessary for success in the course. Online work is not a wise choice for many students who have language and writing problems, or who require the interaction of a classroom group.

Create detailed, complete assignments in advance of the course. Have these in organized electronic format, duplicated on office, home, and traveling computers. Have copies in paper for mailing and archiving. Keep student work in clearly marked folders, virtual or real. Xerox copies as necessary for your portfolio and records. Thermal fax paper deteriorates quickly, so duplicate papers that you need to keep.

Prior to the class, generate as many copies of mailing labels as you will need for the entire semester, and pre-address or code a sufficient number of envelopes.

Mail materials to students a week ahead:

- syllabus
- deadlines and due dates for the entire semester
- hints for student time and resource management
- hints for using the technology that drives the course
- assessment forms, dated and keyed to assignments or checkpoints, with stamped return envelopes

Technology Support

Maintain a positive relationship with technology support people. There will be many questions and problems that you cannot answer, but students will require answers nonetheless. Understand in advance the parameters of support, so that when problems arise, they can be directed to the appropriate source.

Security

Knowing who is whom in an online class is a major concern: how does the teacher know who is doing the coursework ? My approach is to require that students complete two proctored exams at a University site during the trimester. At these exams, students present university identification. The exam setting is also an opportunity to meet students, at least

those who take the exam in the teacher's location. Meeting the students in any situation raises comfort levels, which is beneficial for them and the teacher as well.

Managing your time

Set aside specific times to work on the course. These may differ depending on a particular goal. You may spend a session providing email feedback, another downloading information, another providing feedback. Ideally, this should be a time when you can devote full attention to the course. Try to be in a setting free of distractions. Like the students; you'll be dealing with content and technology at the same time, which requires a high degree of attention to an invisible audience.

Explain your time constraints to students as necessary, and observe them. My experience is that "Asynchronous" is synonymous with "now" to online students. When questions are posed in class, answers are provided. When a question is posed online, a two-day wait for a response may seem unreasonable unless students understand your time constraints, so explain ahead of time how and when you will be available.

Conclusions, suggestions

The role of the teacher changes substantially in the electronic classroom. Teaching takes on a new role, directed more toward orchestration of learning than delivery. For teachers who view themselves as central to the learning experience of students, this will be particularly disconcerting. For others, being a director and facilitator of learning is comfortable. Regardless of the teacher's initial comfort level, teaching online requires flexibility, patience, and a willingness to experiment.

The successful online course is balanced. On the one hand, it must be highly managed and tightly structured; on the other, it should be interactive and driven by communication and feedback. It enables learning, and also allows for expressions of the students' subjective and informational needs. Regardless of how the technology shapes the experience, the emphasis in technology use should remain on effective communication that supports learning.

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